MARINE CORPS GAZETTE ARTICLE # 7, OPERATIONAL PLANNING TEAM AND STAFF INTERACTION

One of the challenges in planning at higher echelons of command is the division of responsibility between the operational planning team (OPT) and the staff as a whole. An OPT is a task organized team often formed at larger headquarters in order to conduct integrated planning for a specific mission. The OPT is normally formed around a core of planners from either future plans or future operations and is fleshed out with representatives from various other staff sections and organizations that can provide the subject matter expertise required to address mission requirements. While a task organized planning team offers the advantage of a focused group of subject matter experts approaching the problem at hand in an integrated manner, the division of responsibilities between the OPT and the principle/designated special staff (commonly referred to as the "battle staff") may become confused. One of the most common misconceptions is that the OPT is viewed as a substitute for normal staff action and coordination. When this occurs, the staff tends to be disengaged from the planning effort and the OPT is left unsupported in terms of staff estimates and guidance. As a result, OPTs are unable to develop plans that are complete, supportable, and synchronized. In commands where the roles of the staff and the OPT are clearly understood and their activities are linked and coordinated, plans tend to be more thorough and executable. In an effort to illustrate the OPT/staff relationship, the following article focuses on the roles and responsibilities of the OPT and staff during planning.

The primary role of the staff and the OPT is to support the commander's decision-making. The staff fulfills its obligation to the commander by simultaneously participating in the planning effort; executing the current operation; and coordinating with the staffs of higher, adjacent, subordinate, and supporting headquarters during planning and execution. In planning, larger staffs participate in the process by providing the OPT staff planning representatives, guidance for staff functional areas, continuous staff estimates, and detailed planning information. The OPT, on the other hand, supports the commander by integrating the staff's planning activities across the warfighting functions. As such, the OPT is a valuable tool for the commander to ensure that his operational planning is not *stovepiped* or compartmentalized. By fully integrating the planning efforts of each staff section (as well as the efforts of subordinate, adjacent, and supporting unit liaison officers), the OPT helps to ensure all relevant planning information has been shared throughout the staff and external commands. Moreover, the OPT ensures that the plan has been thoroughly developed and tested by the staff.

The following considerations are presented to better illustrate the specific roles of the OPT and the staff during planning. The information presented is not all-inclusive, but it does give an overall representation of how the staff and OPT interact in planning.

Mission Analysis

In mission analysis, the OPT leads the planning effort to identify the purpose of the operation and those tasks necessary to accomplish the mission. The OPT concentrates on the following questions:

- What must we do? (Specified tasks.)
- What do we need to do? (Implied tasks.)
- What do we need?
- What don't we have?
- What information do we need to obtain and/or share and with whom do we do so?

Additionally, the OPT normally assists the G-2 in the center of gravity (COG) analysis, reviews and refines the intelligence preparation of the battlespace (IPB) products, and identifies asset and subject matter expert shortfalls. The OPT can also recommend that certain information requirements become commander's critical information requirements (CCIRs).

The staff uses the information developed by the OPT to begin developing initial staff estimates. These estimates will help the commander understand the mission, threat, terrain, and friendly capabilities. These

running staff estimates should also address how problems will be resolved and provide critical facts and assumptions to help orient the CG for the development of his planning guidance. Lastly, the battle staff should provide these critical facts, assumptions and guidance to the OPT. Possible guidance and information to the OPT may include—

- **Chief of Staff**. Planning timeline; battle rhythm; when to issue a warning order to subordinates; operation plan/operation order format; information management plan (IM).
- **G-1**. Projected personnel strengths; critical military occupational specialty (MOS) shortages; assumptions on replacements.
- **G-2**. Threat's purpose and objectives; possible threat courses of action (COAs) (situation templates, high-value targets [HVTs]); evaluate and prioritize threat COAs; threat center of gravity (COG) and critical vulnerabilities (CVs); terrain and weather analysis; projected intelligence collection assets and capabilities (higher and organic); supervise the Red Cell.
- **G-3**. Review: purpose of the operation; proper identification of tasks; identify friendly COG and CVs; area of operation (AO) analysis (is it of sufficient size to accomplish the mission and protect the force and how does it relate to the higher, adjacent, and enemy?); assumptions; end state; command relationships.
- **G-4**. Projected logistics requirements; capability of distribution system; critical shortfalls; maintenance status for critical end items; mobility/countermobility/survivability requirements and capabilities.
- **G-5**. Component coordination requirements for airlift and sealift; next potential MEF mission; battlespace issues; command relationship issues; plans of the adjacent and supporting commands.
- **G-6**. Projected availability and capability of command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence (C4I) assets; capability to lift C4I assets; electronic warfare and information warfare threat.
- **Medical**. Projected treatment and evacuation capabilities; medical return to duty rate.
- **Staff Judge Advocate**. Determines legal constraints and restraints resulting from the Law of War, treaties, United Nations resolutions, rules of engagement.

Course of Action Development

A frequent omission during COA development is that OPTs produce COAs that are incomplete or lack sufficient detail to determine if they are suitable or feasible. This is often caused by a lack of detail in the staff estimates flowing to the OPT. Because the goal of COA Development is to produce decision options for the commander, it is crucial that the entire staff support the process by providing detailed planning data and coordinating with external organizations. If the entire staff does not participate, the OPT will be unable to produce complete and detailed COAs for wargaming.

The OPT's primary responsibility is to develop various ways to accomplish the mission and achieve the desired end state. Specifically, the OPT concentrates on the following questions:

- What do we have to do?
- How do we want to do it?

By focusing on these questions, the OPT translates the commander's intent and planning guidance into initial COAs. After a review of these products by the commander, the OPT conducts COA refinement, reviews the COA based on the commander's COA criteria, and then prepares the COA development brief.

The battle staff supports COA Development by visiting the OPT to ensure that developed COAs are suitable, feasible, acceptable, distinguishable, complete, and in keeping with the commander's planning

guidance. The staff continues to support the OPT by providing detailed staff estimates as well as updating critical facts and assumptions. The battle staff may provide the following guidance and information to the OPT—

- **Chief of Staff**. Adjustments to planning timeline; adjustments to the IM plan; recommendations for following the commander's intent and planning guidance.
- **G-1**. Concept of personnel support; update projected strengths, critical MOS shortages, and assumptions on replacements; enemy prisoner of war (EPW) considerations.
- **G-2**. Refine and update IPB (threat COAs, COG, CVs, HVTs, modified combined obstacle overlay, etc.); provide event template/matrix; ensure a collection plan/concept of intelligence is developed for each friendly COA; ensure that the Red Cell and the OPT are interacting (should be a cooperative vice a competitive effort).
- **G-3**. Guidance on forms of maneuver, decisive and shaping actions, use and location of reserve, terrain management, rear area functions, targeting objectives, command relationships, and task organization; provide detailed relative combat power data; ensure that all concepts (operations, maneuver, fires, intelligence, and support) are nested and supporting graphics are clear and accurate.
- **G-4**. Concept of support; locations of support areas and bases; main supply route analysis; traffic control plan; EPW considerations; detailed staff estimates (required supply rates, stock levels, etc.).
- **G-5**. Details of the command's next potential mission (to include command relationships and battlespace).
- **G-6**. Concept of C4I support; locations of command posts (higher, MEF, and major subordinate commands).
- **Medical**. Concept of medical support; location of medical facilities; casualty planning factors.
- **Staff Judge Advocate**. Determines if COAs comply with legal considerations.

Course of Action War Game

The COA war game allows the commander, the staff, and the OPT to gain a common understanding of friendly and threat COAs. The war game helps to determine the advantages and disadvantages of each COA and allows the warfighting functions to be synchronized across the battlespace.

The OPT is responsible for conducting the war game and briefing the results back to the commander and staff. When conducting the war game, the OPT concentrates on the following questions:

- Does the COA achieve the purpose of the operation?
- Is the COA supportable?
- "What if…?"

By focusing on these questions through the lenses of the commander's evaluation criteria and available staff estimates, the OPT can independently evaluate each friendly COA against selected enemy COAs (most likely, most dangerous, and/or most advantageous). It is through this rigorous testing process that the OPT determines the strengths and weaknesses of each COA.

The battle staff should continue to provide staff estimates and updates to assumptions so that the OPT can thoroughly test each COA. More importantly, the battle staff should be engaged in the war game process so that it can fully understand anticipated critical events, decision points, and the merits of each COA. This understanding is critical to supporting the commander's decision making. The battle staff may provide the following guidance and information during wargaming—

- **Chief of Staff**. Adjustments to planning timeline and IM plan; amplification of the commander's evaluation criteria.
- **G-1**. Casualty projections (combat and noncombat); estimates on personnel strengths; critical MOS shortages, and replacements; replacement timelines; EPW projections.
- **G-2**. Collection plan (coverage, coverage gaps, reconnaissance team insertion/extraction, etc.); collection asset availability and capabilities.
- **G-3**. Updates to relative combat power assessment; movement planning factors; updates to risk assessment; impact of current operations of future operations.
- **G-4**. Class I-IX planning factors; effects of sustainment shortfalls; traffic control considerations; EPW projections.
- **G-5**. Next potential MEF mission; plans of the adjacent and supporting commands.
- **G-6**. Communications capabilities, limitations, and shortfalls; command post displacement timelines.
- **Medical**. Provide input on treatment and evacuation capabilities.
- **Staff Judge Advocate**. Provide impact of legal considerations on actions during war game.

Course of Action Comparison and Decision

In COA comparison and decision, the commander evaluates all friendly COAs and selects the COA which best accomplishes the mission. It is during this step that the commander and the battle staff truly come to the front of the planning process. While it is the OPT's responsibility to present the war game results and the commander's decision options, it is the battle staff 's responsibility to *help the commander compare COAs so that he may decide which COA the command should execute.* It is absolutely essential that the battle staff understand the results of the war game as they pertain to critical events and decision points. By using staff estimates and the commander's evaluation criteria, the battle staff can provide the commander with effective and relevant recommendations for COA selection (branches, sequels, and COA modifications).

Orders Development

The principle/special staff, under the chief of staff's direction, is responsible for developing the order. The order should communicate the commander's intent, guidance, and decisions in a format that is easily understood by those who must execute the plan. Members of the OPT assist their respective staff sections in preparing the order by ensuring that staff estimates are converted into the appropriate annex and appendix. They also provide the history and background as to why certain decisions were made in the development of the plan. Each principle/special staff officer is responsible for reviewing his respective annexes. As part of this review, the staff should conduct an order reconciliation (an internal staff review of the order) and an orders crosswalk (a comparison of the higher and adjacent commands' orders). This review process is key to achieving unity of effort and ensuring that the commander's intent is met.

Transition

Both the OPT and the staff have a role in transition. The OPT usually leads the internal transition of the plan to the command's current operations section by briefing all decision support tools, the enemy situation, and the concept of operations (to include the supporting concepts of intelligence, fires, maneuver, support, etc.). At higher echelons of command, the OPT may provide a plan proponent (typically the G-3 current operations representative to the OPT). This proponent can answer questions, help in the use of the decision support tools, and assist the staff in identifying adjustments to the plan or order in execution. The external transition is conducted by the staff (normally led by the current operations section) and typically consists of briefs and rehearsals (rehearsal of concept drills and confirmation briefs). The external transition should ensure that the staff and subordinate units understand

the plan and that all plans are in keeping with the commander's intent. The external transition also provides a final check that subordinate plans are in keeping with the higher headquarters' plan.

Summary

In summary, the OPT, under the tutelage of the battle staff, will be focused on planning for a specific mission while the staff as a whole is focused on the wider operations of the command. The OPT does not replace the principle/special staff, it is merely a means for the commander to harness the knowledge and resources resident in the staff as a whole while continuing to meet the diverse and ongoing requirements of MAGTF operations.